

Obtaining Counseling Licensure in Alabama

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Abstract

This article describes the historical development of counseling licensure and explains the process for obtaining the Licensed Professional Counselor credential in the state of Alabama. The process of obtaining counseling licensure involves fulfilling an academic requirement, submitting an application, obtaining supervised experience, passing an examination, and some other miscellaneous requirements.

Many counselors-in-training find themselves confused about the process of obtaining the Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) designation in the state of Alabama. This article seeks to reduce such confusion by presenting a concise description of the process required by the Alabama Board of Examiners in Counseling (ABEC). Because the intention for this article is to be brief, what follows is a general description of the requirements for licensure. Exceptions and caveats exist and the interested reader is encouraged to explore the state code of Alabama and the administrative code related to counseling, which can be found at www.abec.alabama.gov. In addition to an overview of the licensure process, the historical development of licensure will also be reviewed.

Historical Development of Licensure

Licensure is a state authorized process of regulating the title and practice of a particular profession (Forster, 1977; Fretz & Mills, 1980; Gross, 1978). Counselor licensure was a milestone for the counseling profession because it led to a stronger counselor identity (Geisler, 1995) and offered credibility to the profession (Davis, Witmer, & Navin, 1990). Professionals with licensure are seen as having more experience and knowledge by the consumers they serve (Davis, 1981). As Forster (1978) stated, "Licensure seems to have become the focal point of the profession's search for additional credibility, which is the purpose of credentialing" (p. 596). In addition to bringing recognition to the field of counseling, one of the original arguments for licensure was to protect the public from incompetent practitioners (Fretz & Mills, 1980).

In 1975, the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), now the American Counseling Association (ACA), established a Licensure Commission (Cottingham & Warner, 1978). Multiple events led to the development of the licensure commission. Counselors were being sued by practitioners in other fields, such as psychology, for infringing on their profession and, by their standards and definitions, practicing psychology without licensure (Cottingham & Warner; Warner, Brooks, & Thompson, 1980).

In 1967, the American Psychological Association (APA) committee on legislation proposed more precise language in psychology licensure laws (Bradley, 1995). These changes in licensure laws led to multiple court cases in the late 1970s focused on the practice of allowing those outside the field of psychology to become licensed. Court cases were brought as a result of the definition of the practice of psychology which included many elements of the practice of counseling. Psychology was a licensed profession while counseling was not and because of this, counselors had no legal rights to engage in psychological practices (Cottingham & Warner, 1978).

As a result of these court battles, three major events occurred. First, many states began to deny those not trained specifically in psychology the opportunity to sit for the licensing exam (Cottingham & Warner; Fretz & Mills, 1980). Second, in 1973, the southern division of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) created the first committee on counselor licensure (Bradley). Third, in July of 1974, the APGA encouraged members in all states to begin lobbying for state licensure (Warner et al., 1980).

Many rationales were given for counselor licensure laws, all of which had growing the profession at their core. First, for counselors to be recognized nationally, a registry was needed to signify that members of the profession had a distinct set of skills apart from those in other related fields (Cottingham & Warner, 1978). Second, licensure laws were intended to reflect the professional standards established by the APGA. The relationship between licensure requirements and professional standards helps to further define the field (Arbuckle, 1977).

As a result of internal and external pressures, counselors began calling for state licensure laws. It was understood by practitioners at the time that it would be difficult to have licensure laws established (Cottingham & Swanson, 1976). Legislators were reluctant to establish laws for fear of restricting consumer choice. In addition, psychology and social work organizations lobbied against counselor licensure laws to protect their own professional interests (Brooks & Gerstein, 1990). Despite these hurdles, Virginia passed the first counselor licensure law in 1976 (Cottingham & Warner, 1978; Warner, Brooks, & Thompson, 1980). In 1979, Alabama became one of the first states in the country to adopt counseling licensure laws (Ala. CODE §34-8A-1, 1979). Currently, the ABEC webpage lists 1581 LPCs (ABEC, n. d. b) and 285 Associate Licensed Counselors (ABEC, n. d. a).

Steps Toward Obtaining Licensure

In order to obtain the LPC designation, several steps must be completed by the applicant. These steps include (a) fulfilling the academic requirement, (b) submitting an application, (c) obtaining supervised counseling experience, (d) passing an examination, and (e) completing some final miscellaneous steps.

Fulfilling the Academic Requirement

Any person wishing to obtain the LPC designation in Alabama must first fulfill the academic requirement. Persons must hold a master's degree from a regionally accredited university in a 48-hour counseling or closely related program. Counseling programs must adhere to nationally recognized training standards, such as those set forth by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) or the Commission on Rehabilitation and Education (CORE). If the applicant's master's degree is not CACREP or CORE accredited, he or she must be able to show that the program's content is equivalent to programs that are accredited (Ala. CODE §34-8A-7, 1979; ABEC, 2006a).

Submitting an Application

After graduating from an approved master's degree program, persons seeking licensure are eligible to submit an application to the Alabama Board of Examiners in Counseling ("the board") (Ala. CODE §34-8A-8, 1979; ABEC, 2006b). A complete application consists of: the (1) main application, (2) course worksheet, (3) plan of supervision and (4) letters of recommendation. The Plan of Supervision may be sent at a later time if the applicant has not obtained a supervisor at the time of application. However, the application is not complete without it. Before the applicant can perform any counseling duties, the application must be approved by the board, the licensure fee must be paid by the applicant, and the license certificate must be issued by the board (Ala. CODE §34-8A-8).

Once a person has received approval from the board, that person becomes an Associate Licensed Counselor (ALC) and can begin counseling-related activities under the direct supervision of the board-approved supervisor (Ala. CODE §34-8A-8, 1979). The board currently approves ALC applications for a period of two years. At the end of this time, ALCs must submit proof of 20 hours of continuing education, 3 hours of which must

be focused on ethics, and a renewal fee for the renewal of the ALC designation (ABEC, 2006e).

Obtaining Supervised Counseling Experience

Two criteria exist regarding supervision and counseling experience hours. ALCs must spend a minimum of 100 hours in supervision annually. Of the 100 hours, 50 hours must be spent in individual face-to-face meetings with the supervisor (ABEC, 2006b). In addition to the supervision hours required, ALCs must obtain a minimum of 3,000 hours of supervised clinical practice (Ala. CODE §34-8A-7, 1979). Of the 3,000 hours, 2250 hours must be hours spent directly counseling individuals, couples, families, or groups. The remainder of the 3,000 hours can be indirect hours related to documentation, consultation, and referral development. The board allows ALCs to subtract 1,000 hours by completing 15 post-masters graduate hours in counseling. ALCs can subtract a total of 2,000 by completing 30 post-masters graduate hours in counseling. However, ALCs must complete a minimum of 1,000 hours of supervised practice, including 750 hours of direct service and 250 hours of indirect service (ABEC, 2006a).

Passing an Examination

All licensure applicants must show competence by passing an examination (Ala. CODE §34-8A-7, 1979; ABEC, 2006a; ABEC, 2006b). The current examination used by ABEC to establish counseling competency is the National Counselor Examination (NCE). Applicants are eligible to take the exam immediately following the completion of the academic requirement (ABEC). Taking the examination soon after graduation may be beneficial to the applicant because many universities require a similar exam for graduation and this material will still be fresh in the applicant's mind if the NCE is taken soon after graduation.

Miscellaneous Requirements

Several requirements fall into the miscellaneous category. Licensure applicants must (a) show that they are at least 19 years old (Ala. CODE §34-8A-7, 1979), (b) be of good character (Ala. CODE §34-8A-7), (c) submit an official academic transcript (ABEC, 2006c), and (d) not be in violation of any part of the state code of Alabama related to counselors (Ala. CODE §34-8A-7). Applicants must show character and professional integrity by furnishing a minimum of three references and endorsements specifically related to the applicant's clinical work, rather than character references, to the board (ABEC, 2006a; ABEC, 2006d). Upon successful completion of all the requirements, the board will meet to vote on approving the applicant for licensure.

Conclusion

While the process of becoming licensed may be time consuming, it does not have to be confusing. Licensure has elevated the field of counseling to a profession. Licensure has increased professional identity and defined what counseling is (Bloom et al., 1990). Davis (1981) articulated the recognition of licensure when he stated that "licensing marks the evolution of counseling from an occupation, a varied collective of practitioners with many common interests and skills, to a profession" (p. 83).

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